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JOHN FRASER

Jorge Luis Borges, Alive in His Labyrinth

I

In a famous passage in Borges' "The Garden of Forking Paths," the narrator imagines a "lost and perhaps mythical labyrinth" that one of his Chinese ancestors reputedly devised, "a maze in which all men would lose themselves."

> I imagined it untouched and perfect on the secret summit of some mountain; I imagined it drowned under rice paddies or beneath the sea; I imagined it infinite, made not only of eight-sided pavilions and of twisting paths but also of rivers, provinces, and kingdoms . . . . I thought of a maze of mazes, of a sinuous, ever growing maze which would take in both past and future and would somehow involve the stars.[1]

Faced with the prodigious displays of metaphysical erudition in *Ficciones*—the endlessly opening vistas of knowledge beyond knowledge, the relentless epistemological questionings, the apparent subverting of every commonsense and common-knowledge certainty—it is easy to feel lost in that labyrinth. It is easy to feel like a wanderer through the Piranesi-like Library of Babel, with its "indefinite, perhaps . . . infinite number of hexagonal galleries," and its embodiment of what Borges elsewhere calls the "concept which corrupts and upsets all others . . . the infinite."[2] Or like Detective Lönnrot in "Death and the Compass" when, in the villa of Triste-le-Roy where he meets his doom, he "ascended dust-covered stairways and came out into circular antechambers; he was infinitely reflected in opposite mirrors; he grew weary of opening or half-opening windows which revealed the same desolate garden outside, from various heights and various angles. . . . On the second floor, on the top story, the house seemed to be infinite and growing."

And at the heart of the labyrinth—for Lönnrot's garden is a desolate one—waits the Minotaur figure of Borges' other most disturbing creation, the nihilist Pierre Menard, with his calm reported certainty that "There is no intellectual exercise which is not ultimately useless." As mediated through his fictive disciple, Menard is a power fig-

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ure, a figure who *knows*. He belongs with those other power figures who surface from time to time in literature with their certainty of the nothingness of human matters—with Helen Schlegel's goblin at the concert in *Howards End* "walking quietly over the universe from end to end" and observing that "there was no such thing as splendour or heroism in the world" (ch.V); with languid, deadly Plain Mr. Jones in Conrad's *Victory*; with others, especially in the turn-of-the-century years when the shock-waves of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer were at their strongest. And what Menard knows is what is there in the dynamics of the maze as defined in "The Library of Babel." Faced with the impossibility of arriving at knowledge and certainty, and recognizing the absurdity of all the energetic strivings after them, all that remains for the clear-eyed is games—power games. So that Menard's seemingly trivial or absurd literary doings, above all his enterprise of writing a *Don Quixote* that will be word for word the same as the novel of that name by Cervantes, are in fact, in their negatings and appropriatings, the games of a supreme master who cannot lose because he has undercut all the conventional ideas of winning. He has achieved the only *real* stability, the stability of the ironical knower who understands the falsity and fictiveness of everything and accepts, with the imagined novelist Herbert Quain, "the essential features of all games: symmetry, arbitrary rules, tedium." If we cannot grasp that his two-and-a-half-chapter appropriation of *Don Quixote* is "possibly the most significant [work] of our time," that simply reflects on our "hesitant and rudimentary art of reading."

However, there is another memorable labyrinth in Borges, namely the immense ruined brick edifice in Cornwall in which, in "Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, Dead in His Labyrinth," two young and very Chestertonian English writers take shelter for the night. While they are in it, Dunraven tells Unwin the story of how the labyrinth came to be built, and of the elaborate manoeuvrings—double-crossing, murder, revenge—in which it played a central part. When he finishes,

> Dunraven could not restrain himself, and asked, in the manner of one who wants to squeeze the last drop, "Can this story be explained?"
>
> Unwin answered, as though thinking aloud, "I have no idea whether it can be explained or not. I only know it's a lie.[3]

I find that exchange comforting, as I do Lönrot's reflection that "The house is not this large . . . . It is only made larger by the penumbra,

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the symmetry, the mirrors, the years, my ignorance, the solitude," and the passage about Herbert Quain's imagined novel *The God of the Labyrinth* in which we are told: "'Everyone thought that the encounter of the two chess players was accidental.' This phrase allows one to understand that the solution is erroneous. The unquiet reader reads the pertinent chapters and discovers *another* solution, the true one." In the rest of these pages I shall argue, in effect, that *Ficciones*, when read correctly, becomes a labyrinth more like the real one which the (fake) Ibn Hassan constructed, and which Unwin goes on to explicate correctly, than the phantasmal one of the passage with which I opened. I am aware of Dunraven's reflection that "Mystery has something of the supernatural about it, and even of the divine; its solution, however, is always tainted by sleight of hand." But Borges, like Dunraven, was steeped in detective stories, and the real labyrinth of *Ficciones* does not seem to me a simple-minded one.

II

Borges himself, if I am correct, did not subscribe to nihilism or Schopenhauerian pessimism, and his fondness for writers like Stevenson, Kipling, C. S. Lewis, and Chesterton, especially Chesterton, is revealing. Like the others, Chesterton had been prey to a deep anxiety about the ultimate validity of ideals, especially Christian ones. And he had made a concerted effort to pass beyond and exorcise nihilism, whether in the nightmarish *The Man Who Was Thursday* or in the Father Brown stories, and not only reaffirm the validity of splendour and heroism but save and re-validate the ordinary world of ordinary people. I suggest that in *Ficciones* Borges too is engaged in an exorcism, the exorcism of Menardism. But in contrast to Chesterton, he does so without any concern to reaffirm a religious alternative. Though dealing with metaphysical issues, he avoids any recourse to metaphysics as a way out of certain difficulties. And his analytical approach to the question of art and fictions plays a central part here. Of one of the narratives in *The Aleph* he remarks that "This piece, like many others of mine, is halfway between a real short story and an essay." What we have in the curious half-way works in *Ficciones*, I suggest, is an impressively intelligent analysis of certain Janus-faced relations with respect to knowledge and perception. And in its acknowledgment of complexities and challenges, including the kinds of metaphysical challenges that I sketched above, the exorcism occurs without causing any flattening or banalization of experience. When

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one grasps the dynamics of *Ficciones*, one can see more clearly how some of the subsequent works, particularly the straightforward tales of chivalric action in *The Aleph*, fit in and make sense.

Essentially, in *Ficciones* Borges defines certain problems in the first part, *The Garden of Forking Paths*, and moves on beyond them, or into a fuller elucidation of them, in the second, *Artifices*.

With one exception, which I shall come to shortly, *The Garden of Forking Paths*, especially the edition without "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim" in it,[4] offers us a congeries of images in which intellection —knowing, imagining, writing—is the only "real" activity. What particularly interests me is how the nature of knowledge is presented. "The Library of Babel" is of central importance here. In that demoralizing work, knowledge, real knowledge, possesses an imperial extension and exactness. Knowledge is perfect, error-free, and stands in an antithetical relationship to ignorance, wherein error is total error. It is also, essentially, a reified knowledge, independent of knowers. And it is static: "the Library will last on forever: illuminated, solitary, infinite, perfectly immovable, filled with precious volumes, useless, incorruptible, secret." The effects of this view on its adherents are devastating. "The certainty that some shelf in some hexagon contained precious books and that these books were inaccessible," remarks the narrator, "seemed almost intolerable"; and "the certainty that everything has been already written nullifies or makes phantoms of us all." Furthermore, the strains of the situation produce such absurdities as the conviction that all the titles in the Library contain a cryptographic meaning, that all syllables, even, are charged with meaning, and that somewhere "there must exist a book which is the cipher and perfect compendium of *all the rest*." And in a mirror-reversal of the presumed total objectivity of "real" knowledge, some enquirers turn to total subjectivity, such as when they abandon the very notion of determinable meaning or—it is in another story but could as well have been in this one—invent new authors by selecting a cluster of works by different authors and proceeding to elucidate the psychology of their postulated single creator.

Nor is this all. In places *The Garden of Forking Paths* offers a more subtle analysis of the craving for pure knowing implicit in the idea of perfect and (as one puts one's hand on and opens *the* magical book) almost instantaneously acquired knowledge. The craving offers itself as an alternative way of knowing and perceiving, a way out of stasis and mechanicalness. And in art and especially literature—as presented in certain of the stories—we find ourselves in familiar terri-

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tory. In the "monism or extreme idealism" of Tlön for example, we have the Bergsonian belief that reality is constituted by irreducible states of mind, and that "The mere act of giving [one] a name, that is of classifying it, implies a falsification of it." The account of the language of Tlön, an account recalling Ernest Fenollosa's *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, presents us with two complementary techniques for avoiding the stasis of classification: the South excludes nouns and relies instead on a system of verbs and adverbial qualifiers ("The moon rose over the sea" becoming "Upward, behind the onstreaming it mooned"); the North replaces nouns and verbs with clusters of adjectives, so that "moon" becomes, say, "airy-clear over dark-round." In the poetry of the latter region we have both the Imagistic conjunction of disparate sense elements—e.g., one auditory, one visual—and the Mallarméan "word," as in the "famous poems made up of one enormous word, a word which in truth forms a poetic *object*, the creation of the writer." And in all this, as in the notion of the magical book, the found key, and so forth, there is the idea of a successful escape from the prison of erroneous "normal" consciousness and artistic expression.

I suggest that the first story in *Artifices* defines certain ineluctable drawbacks to that kind of thought and knowing. In contrast to the reification of the Library, the figures of Funes the Memorious shows us a *person* doing the remembering, perceiving, and knowing. Liberated as he is from his body and from the needs of action by his crippling accident, "his perception and his memory were infallible." His perceptions have the total accuracy that the literature of northern Tlön, with its concern for phenomena like "the vague, quivering pink which one sees when the eyes are closed," can only grope towards. "A circumference on a blackboard, a rectangular triangle, a rhomb, are forms which we can fully intuit; the same held true with Ireneo for the tempestuous mane of a stallion, a herd of cattle in a pass, the ever-changing flame or the innumerable ash, the many faces of a dead man during the course of a protracted wake." But the result of these gifts is neither bliss nor wisdom with respect to the "multiform world which was instantaneously and almost intolerable exact." And when the narrator speaks of how nobody in the "populous towers" or "surging avenues" of New York, London, Babylon "has felt the heat and pressure of a reality as indefatigable as that which day and night converged upon the unfortunate Ireneo in his humble South American farmhouse," I am reminded of Robert Graves' poem "The Cool Web," with its analysis of the drama and allure of unstructured

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perception and its potential for destruction. Furthermore, Funes' paralysis is not only physical, it is mental too. In his "dizzying" and essentially symbolist, world, he is, as the narrator reminds us, "almost incapable of general, platonic ideas." Despite his prodigious memory, "I suspect . . . that he was not very capable of thought. To think is to forget a difference, to generalize, to abstract. In the overly replete world of Funes there were nothing but details . . . ." His new system of enumeration, for example, is useless for any activity except simple counting and labelling.

I have just described one of the two pivotal works in *Ficciones*. The other, I suggest, is the final story of the first book, "The Garden of Forking Paths," a story whose title may well contain an allegorical intention. In it symbolist and chivalric elements overlap and cohabit, but with the scales tipping in favour of the latter. And its Chestertonian, Father Brownish aspects remind us that every detective story or novel, even the most mystifying ones by John Dickson Carr (squaring or cubing Chesterton) ultimately ends with the assented-to solving of a mystery or mysteries, and the arrival not at "truth" but at specific, limited truths. The puzzle of the Chinese maze that I referred to earlier is in fact wholly resolved. And successful deciphering and communicating occurs elsewhere. In "The Library of Babel," the intimidating question is asked at one point, "You who read me, are you sure you understand my language?" In "The Garden of Forking Paths," the implicit and demonstrated answer in a couple of key respects is, "Yes, within limits, and for practical purposes." The sinologist Albert successfuly decodes the message of the spy's Chinese ancestor about the maze; the spy's chief in World War One Berlin successfully decodes the spy's murder of the sinologist, with its play on the name Albert. And the puzzle-solving and communicating go on in a context of physical action, the figurative duel between the spy and his pursuer Captain Richard Madden, the literal duel between the British and German armies on the Western Front. The pulls and nudges and strangenesses of intellection are there, of course. But near the end of the story, in a particularly Chestertonian passage, we read how:

> Once again I sensed the pullulation of which I have already spoken. It seemed to me that the dew-damp garden surrounding the house was infinitely saturated with invisible people. All were Albert and myself, secretive, busy and multiform in other dimensions of time. I lifted my eyes and the short nightmare disappeared. In the black and yellow garden

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> there was only a single man, but this man was as strong as a statute, and this man was walking up the path and he was Captain Richard Madden.

Even in the multiple version of the Chinese puzzle-epic that the sinologist discusses, there is a significant fixed point: "I remember the final words, repeated at the end of each version like a secret command: 'Thus the heroes fought, with tranquil heart and bloody sword. They were resigned to killing and to dying'."

Each of the five stories that follow "Fumes the Memorious" seems to me to add something with respect to the interrelationships between thought (including "creative" thought) and action. I shall deal with them in the order in which they occur.

III

In "The Form of the Sword," we have what seems to me an entirely unironical, and up to a point straightforward, celebration of chivalric values. The hero of the narrative-within-a-narrative of Irish Republican courage, cowardice, and betrayal is the conventional romantic revolutionary, convinced that "only lost causes can interest a gentleman," stirred by the heroic idealism of Ireland's "bitter and loving mythology," and unself-regardingly brave in battle. In contrast, the ironist-intellectual Moon, "thin and soft at the same time," views the fighting in which they are engaged with the confident superiority of the *truly* insightful man who has "reduced universal history to a sordid economic conflict," as opposed to the chivalric man for whom "the reasons that one man may have to abominate another, or love him, are infinite." And his air of possessing a superior wisdom as he lounges around "with some book of strategy in his hand: F. N. Maude or Clausewitz," is bogus. He is in fact a coward who, "in order to show that his being a physical coward made no difference to him, . . . increased his intellectual arrogance." His betrayal to the Black and Tans of the hero who saves his life at the risk of his own (his *reasonable* betrayal: "My reasonable friend was selling me reasonably"), with its garden setting and Judas money, elicits from the scarfaced narrator the reflection that, "What one man does is something done, in some measure, by all men."

And when at the end of the story the narrator turns out to be, not the hero but the coward who sent him to his death and fled to South America, this does not undercut all that has gone before and reduce the story to an ironical commentary on the fictiveness of the chivalric

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values whose fictive celebration we have been listening to. On the contrary, what is introduced is the Borgesian theme of the transforming power of fictions and fiction-making. In "The Form of the Sword," the rationalist coward not only takes over the hero's identity but assimilates his *Weltanschauung*. And he becomes genuinely heroic himself, stoically working his small Argentine ranch, labouring in the fields beside his peons, governing them with impeccable fairness, and only surrendering his steely self-control in the tormented privacy of his occasional three-day drinking bouts. He judges and condemns his former self wholly in chivalric terms.

"Theme of the Traitor and Hero" continues the analysis with respect to heroism and the assimilation of patterns, and goes further into the question of knowledge, knowing, and truth. A significant tip is given at the outset with the reference to "the flagrant Chesterton (contriver and embellisher of elegant mysteries)." A recurring pattern in Chesterton's own mysteries, as I have said, is the way in which what appears at the outset to be a supernatural overturning of all normal laws and a plunge into madness turns out at the end to have a perfectly rational explanation. Initially, the historian who is trying to figure out why an early-nineteenth-century Irish revolutionary went dead against the grain of his own personality and values is drawn into fantastic Borgesian speculations. Aspects of the enigma "seem to repeat or combine phenomena from remote regions, from remote ages," and as he begins to perceive resemblances between what happened in the Irish episode and things that happened earlier,

> These parallels . . . induce Ryan to assume a secret pattern in time, a drawing in which the lines repeat themselves. He ponders the decimal history imagined by Condorcet; the morphologies proposed by Hegel, Spengler, and Vico; the characters of Hesiod, who degenerate from gold to iron. He considers the transmigration of souls . . . .

He thinks, in other words, about the compulsions of irresistible forces in human affairs. And when he escapes from this labyrinth, it is into "other labyrinths even more inextricable and heterogeneous . . . ." Finally, and transformingly, he comes upon the correct and entirely rational explanation of the events, namely that the hero had in fact been a traitor, and had been discovered by his associates to be one, and had then agreed to take part in the elaborately Chestertonian plot that will result in his death but leave his heroic image intact in the eyes of all but the inner circle of plotters.

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Here too we do not have a collapse back into banality. The aspirations towards revolution and national independence remain heroic. The visionary planning of the artificer-artist Nolan who conceives of the conspiracy is heroic in scale, as is the enterprise as it is actually executed. And Kilpatrick is heroic when he accepts Nolan's vision and agrees to take "the opportunity to redeem himself[,] . . . carried away by the minutely scrupulously destiny which redeemed and condemned him." The twist at the end of the story about Nolan's desire for an eventual recognition by some discerning reader of what has really gone on in the episode recalls Henry James' "The Figure in the Carpet," and reminds us of the concern of James himself, whom Borges speaks of admiringly, with the problems of fiction and reality in stories like "The Real Thing."

In "Death and the Compass" we have a further extension of the idea of fictions transforming reality, and a further demystification with respect to occult texts and knowledge. All the appurtenances of mysticism are here, including a much more elaborate (figurative) labyrinth than the one in "Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, Dead in his Labyrinth." But in fact this labyrinth too is entirely non-mystical; it is a species of theatre. Near the outset I quoted from the description of Detective Lönnrot's sense of the uncanny at the villa of Triste-le-Roy, with its "superfluous symmetries" and "maniacal repetitions." Earlier in the story we are told of the contents of the library of the murdered rabbi whose death Lönnrot is investigating: "*A Vindication of the Cabala; An Examination of the Philosophy of Robert Fludd*; a literal translation of the *Sepher Yezirah*; a *Biography of the Baal Shem*; a *History of the Sect of the Hasidim*; a monograph (in German) on the Tetragrammaton; another, on the divine nomenclature of the Pentateuch." They are books that bring to mind the Library of Babel. And in Lönnrot, who "thought of himself as a pure thinker, an Auguste Dupin, [though] there was something of the adventurer in him, and even of the gamester," we have a man who accords the maximum seriousness, the maximum charge of meaning, to the kind of universe described in those books. Everything becomes for him a sign leading outwards into mystery and power; actions are ineluctably interconnected, inviting a "purely rabbinical explanation"; and physical objects, like a house, or an "alley of rose-colored mud walls," or "a silvery horse drinking the crapulous water of a puddle," have a symbolist penumbra of significance.

But in fact Commissioner Treviranus is right when he enquires apropos of the presumed third murder, "And supposing the story of

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this night were a sham?" The series of crimes, signs, messages has nothing at all to do with the "all-powerful and mystic" Name of God, or with the Hasidim (in quest of that Name) engaging in human sacrifices. There is indeed a mystery, a "labyrinth," and Lönnrot is right in his rejection of the Commissioner's naturalistic explication of the first killing in terms of a robbery. But as the gangster Dandy Red Scharlach explains, it is a *created* labyrinth, created by one man, himself, using as materials "a dead writer on heresies, a compass, an eighteenth-century sect, a Greek word, a dagger, the rhombs of a paint shop," and starting an elaborate piece of theatre with respect to the third "murder." And Lönnrot, who has consistently misinterpreted the offered signs, is entrapped and killed, persisting up to the end in asserting the claims of ideal patterns.

In this story too, however, there is no collapse back into everydayness, the everydayness that Lönnrot refers to when he tells the Commissioner that "reality may avoid the obligation to be interesting, but . . . hypotheses may not." If more than one kind of mysteriousness has been shown to be susceptible of everyday explanations in terms of normal human motives—here, revenge—there remains nevertheless the human strangeness of Scharlach's implacable commitment to avenge Lönnrot's arrest of his brother, and his willingness to work out and execute so elaborate a plot, involving so complex an interaction with another's mind. Moreover, the starting point of the plot was Scharlach's nine days of fear and delirium after being wounded by a police bullet, a delirium dominated by the metaphor of all paths leading to Rome and by the sense that "the world was a labyrinth, from which it was impossible to flee . . . ."

"The Secret Miracle" recapitulates some of the main themes touched on in the previous stories, especially with reference to art. We are presented in it with an image of art as a personal and admirable activity of creating, shaping, making, in contrast both to the stasis of pure perception and knowing and to the paranoid fantasies of the hero of Jaromir Hladik's play. Hladik's case, prior to his death sentence by the German invaders of Czechoslovakia, is a familiar one. As an author, he desires to be assessed "by what he conjectured or planned," not by what he actually accomplishes. He studies mystical writers like Boehme and Fludd. He engages in elaborate metaphysical speculations about time and eternity—unprovable, unprofitable, and in at least one major respect, as he himself acknowledges, fallacious. The verse drama that he works at in an effort to "redeem himself from his equivocal and languid past" emphasizes subjectivity, solips-

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ism (the attempted escapes and seeming heroism of the protagonist are purely mental), and a "circular delirium." And the plot of the play "was the most appropriate invention to conceal his [own] defects and to manifest his strong points," and "embodied the possibility of redeeming (symbolically) the fundamental meaning of his life." When the fatality of his Jewishness lands him without hope of escape before a Nazi firing squad, however, the concrete, ineluctable situation produces a redefining of his art activities. Given a literally miraculous opportunity to finish his play mentally before dying, he no longer engages in elaborate games involving his self-image as a literary man. He disinterestedly—i.e., without any possibility of public rewards—works on, caring for and bringing to completion his work in the teeth of brute force. And in so doing he triumphs over those fears of which we are told earlier that "He faced those imaginary executions with true terror (perhaps with true courage)."

Lastly, in "Three Versions of Judas," with its epigraph from one of the quintessential intellectuals-as-men-of-action, T. E. Lawrence, Borges returns yet again to earlier themes. Once more we have the Borgesian scholarship or pseudo-scholarship; once more, the intricacies of theological speculation. But this time the mysterious does not lie outside in the metaphysical galaxy. It is located in the mind of a specific man in a concrete historical situation, with theologians circling around him and pointing to him but unable to arrive at any certain knowledge about him. In addition, going beyond "The Form of the Sword," Borges is concerned with the possibility of transcending and forgiving the sin of betrayal: in other words, with escaping from the idea of an unalterable universe and securing a place for human weakness, as against the idea of a too-perfect and invulnerable perfection. And heroism here is unequivocally a matter of personal choice, perception, judgment, and commitment, above all when "with a terrible lucidity [Judas] premeditated his offense" out of a perception of his necessary role in "the most precious drama in the history of the world." The certainty mentioned in the epigraph ("There seemed a certainty in degradation") is not the certainty of abstract knowledge; it is the certainty of experience, of a lived state of being.

IV

When in "The Garden of Forking Paths" the sinologist guides the narrator towards the true nature of the maze that he had tried in vain to imagine,

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> With proper veneration I listened to these old tales, although perhaps with less admiration for them in themselves than for the fact that they had been thought out by one of my own blood, and that a man of a distant empire had given them back to me, in the last stage of a desperate adventure, on a Western island.

Useful as the metaphor of a labyrinth is, it misrepresents *Ficciones*—and Borges—in so far as it implies a construction with a static centre and a solution. Like other major works, *Ficciones* is heuristic, an exploring. And in speaking as I have of the increasing emphasis on action in it, I have not been implying that Borges' exorcism of nihilism is a matter of replacing one system of thought with its antithesis.

Nihilism was indeed antithetical to the heroic values that figured in the heroic fictions that Borges loved and in the doings of Argentine men of action, including his own military forebears; and like Conrad, and Chesterton, and C. S. Lewis, Borges obviously felt its threat strongly. Moreover, his experience of it had been an intimate one. In the story "The South" that concludes *Ficciones*, the librarian-protagonist Dahlmann comes close to dying of septicemia and passes through a fevered nightmare of demoralization like that of Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* after the death of Kurtz ("And then they very nearly buried me."). Borges himself, as we know from his "Autobiographical Essay" in *The Aleph*, also came close to dying from septicemia. "When I began to recover," he tells us,

> I feared for my mental integrity. I remember that my mother wanted to read to me from a book I had just ordered, C. S. Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet*, but for two or three nights I kept putting her off. At last she prevailed, and after hearing a page or two I fell to crying. My mother asked me why the tears. "I'm crying because I understand," I said. A bit later, I wondered whether I could ever write again.

And the first story that he wrote after his recovery was "Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote." There is no doubt in my mind that the fictional second half of "The South," in which Dahlmann sets out for his ranch on the pampas to convalesce, is an allegory of the giving of part of Borges' own psyche to what in a shorthand way I have called chivalric values.

But there is no question of Borges working his way towards a simple "position," a position embodied in "The South" and in the tale of heroic action, "The End," that precedes it in *Ficciones*. In creating

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Menard, Borges was plainly drawing upon, and intensifying elements in, the Mallarméan figure in his intellectual youth whom he describes in the "Autobiographical Essay," and of whom at the age of eighty he said, "I have known many famous men, but non-one has impressed me as Macedonio Fernández." and behind Fernández loomed Mallarmé himself, that arch-intimidator of us all. Borges too was a modernist man of letters, a symbolist poet with an abiding interest in ontology and metaphysics, and attendant anxieties and questions. If he interrogated Mallarméanism by pushing some of its aspects to extremes,[6] he also interrogated the chivalric and the problems of heroic action. At the end of "The South," Dahlmann is about to die in a knife-fight that he has been seduced into at a pampas whistle-stop; and the final words of the narrator of "The Garden of Forking Paths" as he awaits execution are the reflection that his Chief in Berlin, though reading the murder correctly, "does not know, for no one can, of my infinite penitence and sickness of the heart." For the passionately intellectual Borges, the sword was always an equivocal object, beautiful but deadly. And it is precisely the ongoing dialectics of the intellectual and the physical in his work, and his concern to connect rather than disjoin values, fictions, and action, that make him so important for us.

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Notes

1. *Ficciones*, ed. and introd. Anthony Kerrigan (N.Y.: Grove, 1962). All quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from this text.
2. "Avatars of the Tortoise," *Labyrinths; Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, pref. André Maurois (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 237.
3. *The Aleph and Other Stories 1933–1969; Together with Commentaries and an Autobiographical Essay*, ed. and trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni in collaboration with the author (N.Y.: Dutton, 1970), p. 121.
4. *Ficciones* (Buenos Aires: Emece, 1956).
5. *Borges at Eighty: Conversations*, ed. Willis Barnstone (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1982), p. 78.
6. "Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote" was obviously partly a response to Valéry's eulogistic pieces on Mallarmé in the Twenties and Thirties (to be found in Paul Valéry, *Leonardo Poe Mallarmé*, trans. Malcolm Cowley and James R. Lawler, Princeton Univ. Press, 1972).

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